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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001285

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, AOUN ALLY ELIE SKAFF
DEFENDS HIZBALLAH ALLIANCE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Minister of Agriculture Elie Skaff defended both his and Michel Aoun's alliance with Hizballah in an August 30 meeting with visiting NEA DAS Hale. Skaff argued that the West had abandoned the weak and divided Christians of Lebanon, forcing them to make internal alliances. Skaff strongly questioned the USG's unilateral support for the "Saudi-minded" Hariri and Sunni bloc, fearing the Muslim Brotherhood would topple the current Syrian regime if Sunnis gained the majority in upcoming Lebanese elections. Skaff avoided directly addressing USG and Israeli concerns about Hizballah rearmament, and called a recent Hizballah attack on a Lebanese Armed Forces helicopter an "accident."

USG FOCUS WILL CONTINUE IN LEBANON

2. (C) Newly appointed Minister of Agriculture Elie Skaff (an ally of opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun and leader of the opposition Zahle bloc) met with visiting NEA DAS Hale, the Ambassador, PolOff, and ConOff on August 30. DAS Hale opened the meeting by reaffirming the USG's commitment to Lebanon, a relationship he said will remain robust throughout and after the U.S. presidential elections. He highlighted bipartisan support for Lebanon and USG interest in utilizing the Doha Agreement as a platform to move forward peacefully. However, DAS Hale remarked, the Doha Agreement did not solve underlying internal issues in Lebanon. Faith must be restored in state institutions to create a sustainable government, he emphasized. DAS Hale continued by highlighting recent Egyptian support for Lebanon as a positive sign, adding that Jordan and Saudi Arabia could act as further stabilizing forces as well.

SKAFF AVOIDS ADDRESSING HIZBALLAH
REARMAMENT

3. (C) DAS Hale then switched to the rearmament of Hizballah

in southern Lebanon, which he stressed was a grave and valid concern for both Americans and Israelis. He highlighted that there is an unimpeded flow of weapons to Hizballah that matches or exceeds levels in 2006, warning that there will inevitably be consequences for such actions.

14. (C) Skaff evaded making a direct response on the concerns of Hizballah rearmament. Instead, he claimed not to have any information on the topic and asked "are the weapons defensive or offensive," implying that Hizballah's acquisition of defensive weapons did not present a serious problem. "I think missiles are considered offensive weapons," DAS Hale retorted, to which Skaff had no response.

15. (C) Addressing the possibilities of an Israeli-initiated war, Skaff noted that Israel could destroy Lebanon, but it could not control nor eliminate the 60 to 70 million Hizballah supporters short of detonating a nuclear bomb. "If the Israelis are wise," he said, "they would work towards peace." Skaff also seemed to think that if the USG solved its problems with Iran, many of Lebanon's internal conflicts would also be resolved.

CHRISTIANS ARE WEAK

16. (C) Skaff reminisced that in the 1970s, Christians had greater control of governmental institutions and were much better represented in the parliament. He said this changed once the Sunnis and Shia each united within themselves into

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armed and politically cohesive blocks. Meanwhile, he commented, the Christians remained divided and unarmed, many of them leaving Lebanon altogether. This left the Christians in a weak and vulnerable position, Skaff noted, adding "we looked to the West for support, but the West did not care." The more Christians feel threatened, the more they will continue to ally with others, Skaff explained. "It's a very simple calculation: we have to protect ourselves; you are not going to protect us."

17. (C) According to Skaff, the focus of upcoming elections will be whether Christians decide to ally with the Shia (the current opposition) or the Sunnis (the current majority). There is a fight for who will control parliament in 2009, he noted, and then warned "if we win, don't misjudge Aoun." DAS Hale assured that the USG's interests were to guarantee the free and fair elections of Lebanon, not to affect the outcome.

EXPLAINING THE HIZBALLAH ALLIANCE

18. (C) Skaff seemed eager to explain and defend his agreement to an alliance with Hizballah, saying he "did what he had to do" after being snubbed by Hariri in previous elections. Hariri and the Sunnis "have a very Saudi way of thinking," he commented, inserting that he did not like the way the Sunni bloc dealt with other factions. Skaff cited a deteriorating relationship with Hariri, the Sunni marginalization of the Aoun and Zahle blocs, and the weak position of the Christians as his rationale for allying with the opposition. "We had to fight for recognition, and without Hizballah we had no chance of gaining a majority" Skaff declared. "If you can't live with the one you love, love the one you live with."

19. (C) In response to Skaff's justification, DAS Hale asserted that an alliance with Hizballah could not, in any way, benefit Christians or any other faction. He said the USG would not support any alliance with Hizballah. (Note: Skaff has had a historically tumultuous relationship with the Hariri family due to an outstanding 12 million dollar loan obtained from Hariri-owned BankMed. It is alleged that to repay this loan, Skaff created a joint venture in 2007 with

Shia partners financially backed by Hizballah. End Note.)

THE SUNNIS ARE THE REAL ENEMY

¶10. (C) "You chose the wrong allies, Skaff commented, blatantly questioning the USG's alliance with Hariri. "Who were the ones that destroyed your buildings on 9/11?" he asked, "It was the Sunnis. You have to ask yourself, who are your real enemies, the Sunnis or the Shia?" Skaff warned that the Sunnis have "great aspirations" and are simply waiting for another Nasser-like leader to unite them. Meanwhile, he said, the Shia are more defensive in nature and "peace with the Shia is more sustainable." DAS Hale assured that the USG is a friend of moderates across all factions and religions and knew it could work with them, but Hizballah is not moderate.

¶11. (C) Skaff persisted by repeatedly voicing his discontent with the current administration's Lebanon policy, notably that of supporting only one bloc and thus "dividing the country." He attributed the creation of the opposition to the USG's unilateral support of Hariri and March 14. Skaff did, however, express satisfaction that, unlike before, the USG seemed willing to work within the Doha framework.

¶12. (C) Continuing his complaints against the Sunnis, Skaff speculated that if the Sunnis gain the majority in upcoming elections in Lebanon, then the current Alawite regime in neighboring Syria would be overthrown by a fanatical Muslim Brotherhood. "Then it will be over for us," he conceded, "and we will do everything to prevent this from happening." Skaff further remarked that he does not oppose the current

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Syrian leadership, providing it remains out of Lebanon.

¶13. (C) Still keen on defending his alliance with Hizballah, Skaff explained the Shia are a key ally, not only because they are an overwhelming majority in Lebanon, but also because they represent a consistently threatened minority within Islam. "Israel is not their only worry," Skaff acknowledged of the Shia, "they are in the same boat as we Christians." Skaff called Aoun a strategist, not a fanatic, for allying with Hizballah, and assured that Aoun had considered all angles and believed the Shia to be a "shield against a Sunni invasion."

¶14. (C) DAS Hale responded that the Syrian scenario presented by Skaff was highly unlikely and, that for better or worse, the Syrian regime seemed steadfast at the moment. He also cautioned that the Christians are "riding a tiger" in supporting Hizballah and that Hizballah's actions were much more likely to destabilize the region than those of the Sunnis.

HELICOPTER ATTACK WAS AN ACCIDENT

¶15. (C) When asked by DAS Hale to explain the August 28th attack on a Lebanese Armed Forces helicopter, Skaff responded that there is an on-going investigation looking into the matter and stressed that Hizballah was being fully cooperative. Explaining the attack, Skaff said a young Hizballah supporter had fired at the helicopter, but the results were unintentional. "Even President Sleiman has mentioned that the area the helicopter was in a very dangerous area," he commented, stating that helicopters routinely notify UNIFIL before flying over this region. Skaff expressed he did not expect factional tensions to escalate as a result of this attack.

¶16. (C) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

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